Historical Society of Palm Desert

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The Hourglass

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COACHELLA VALLEY & PALM DESERT

A history compiled by Society President Hal Rover

The topography of the Coachella Valley is unique. We who live here appreciate its beauty and variety which delights our senses and stirs our imaginations. During the early Cenozoic development of the Pacific Plate, the earth's surface cooled and buckled and created the mountain heights and valley depths.

The Coachella Valley is probably a continuation of the Gulf of California. The Salton Sink, as it is known, includes sand dunes, faults, gorges, bedrock, volcanic knobs, hot springs, hot brine wells, and snail and clam shell deposits. It is the largest dry land area below sea level in the western United States.

The Colorado River emptied into this part of the Gulf, and for 300 to 400 years deposited a silt delta across the Mexican border and alternately caused the Sink to fill and evaporate. This area became known as the ancient Lake Cahuilla, not to be confused with the current reservoir at the end of the Coachella Canal. You can see evidence of old Lake Cahuilla in the water stains above La Quinta on the mountain walls.

This valley took its name "Conchilla" as dry beds yielded millions of tiny sea shells when 18th century Spanish explorers saw no lake – before any Salton Sea. Of course, the Salton Sea was just an accident that happened 100 years ago, when a flooding Colorado River broke its banks in Imperial County. Only herculean efforts by the Southern Pacific Railroad and Imperial Irrigation District restored the river to its banks by 1907.

While our nation was still forming in the late 1700's, there began to be stirrings and some human movement threading its way in and out of valleys and mountains. The Cahuilla Indians were active all over this area on its alluvial fans and rocky terrain. They lived in scattered rancherias, each with its open space and water supply somewhere nearby. The Portrero band of Beaumont, Aqua Caliente of Palm Springs, Rincon, Toro, Martinez, La Mosa and Cabazon all were living off the low desert lands.

There was a "red flag" up about this desert. Even when Juan Baptista de Anza made his way paralleling the Mexican border in 1774, he avoided the unknown spaces to the north. Moving west through the Imperial Valley, he climbed out through Borrego Springs and Oak Grove on his way to colonize San Francisco. In 1769 Junipero Serra found his way along the the coast as he began to build his mission chain to Sonoma. About 1820 the padres of the San Gabriel Mission established a rancho in the San Gorgonio Pass. Still, no one was venturing to the vast lowlands.

Around 1815 there were scattered reports of Indians having knowledge of salt deposits, and of oxen-drawn carretas making their way to open deposits below sea level in the Salton Sink. In 1823 Captain Juan Romero successfully journeyed from San Gabriel to Tuscon with the news of a good well at Indian Wells; but Romero reported to superiors that it was "completely impractical." The Spanish period of history in California ended in 1848 with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Only a few stout souls reportedly explored ways to traverse a trail from Mexico to Sonoma.

When California was admitted to the union in 1850, the first legislature created 27 counties. At that time the Coachella Valley area was part of San Diego County, until Riverside County was carved out in 1893.

On January 9, 1847 the well-known Mormon Battalion reached the Colorado River. They had trudged from Fort Leavenworth to Santa Fe to the river. Upon encountering the Algodones Dunes west of Yuma, they dipped south, emerging at Plaster City. The battalion moved again through the San Diego mountains and Warner's Ranch, then to San Luis Rey Mission near Oceanside. Again, no one was testing the unknown desert; it was too risky, availability of water was questionable, and temperatures were unlivable.

An active and growing population was awakening throughout the west as gold became the elixir that stirred hope in the hearts of hearty men and women. News, sometimes slow to spread, carved deep desire in men to search for precious metals to make them wealthy and life secure. It was a risky existence.

One such sighting became reality at Ehrenberg, Arizona across the Colorado River from Blythe. Word spread through the new state. Prospectors from Sutter's Mill and all over the west hurried south only to find a foreboding desert to forge; but forge it they did, and the well-known Bradshaw Trail was established.

In 1862 William Bradshaw of the California Fremont Expedition decided to capitalize on traffic and established a wagon road through the desert to Ehrenberg. There were stations at Whitewater, Agua Caliente, Indian Wells, Torres and Martinez. Chief Cabezon was reportedly most helpful in receiving new routes through Palm Springs and the desert to complete this gold route. Each location required adequate quantities of water for weary hopefuls as they prayed for gold at the end of the rainbow. Dos Palmas is still a viable oasis, it and the Bradshaw Trail can still be traversed to this day, now by automobile. It parallels I-10 from Hwy. 86 to the river.

The U. S. government set up a railroad expedition to explore the pass to Yuma in 1853. Lt. R. S. Williamson and William Blake, a geologist from the Smithsonian Institute, combed a roadbed for a rail and water route in order to complete the transcontinental railroad to Yuma. The push for railroad extension caused serious water needs, as the now giant steam engines required vast supplies at regular intervals always near railroad sidings. By 1876 Indio (then known as Indian Wells) was connected by rail to San Bernardino and Los Angeles. One year later the line was completed to Yuma.

A member of the Williamson Expedition, the 27 year old William Blake was a geology, mineralogy, and archeology expert who studied the physical aspects of the Coachella Valley and the Colorado Desert. He prophesied that artesian wells would be discovered all over Mecca, Thermal, Coachella and Indio. There was some marked success by the Southern Pacific Railroad in digging wells at that time. It was later, by 1888, that his prediction was to be fulfilled.

In the years following Blake's statement about artesian wells, a growing number of farmers who homesteaded the area found volumes of water just below the surface. Greater numbers realized the need for collective water development as land acquisitions slowed due to too many users sucking liquid from the southeastern desert floor. A proposal in 1917 to channel water from Baldwin Lake and the Whitewater River to the Imperial Valley hit Coachella Valley settlers like a brick. How could anyone bypass this valley to supply the wants of others in northeast Imperial Valley?

Production of dates, vegetables, and citrus were attracting great interest among farmers now, since there was an active railroad available for shipping. Because of the mushrooming needs for water, the time was ripe to enter this collective water effort. Settlers must protect their rights, and so the Coachella Valley County Water District was formed in May of 1918.

About this time and a few miles to the west, a handful of property owners saw this alluvial fan and dunes called Palm Village (soon to be Palm Desert) as a bubble of opportunity. For the 36 square miles of Indian Wells and Palm Desert, the first records in 1910 show that well-drilling was done by Walter Schmid. Eighteen wells had been drilled by 1919, and the Palm Desert Community Services District was established to handle the growth.

The stage was set for a "dream to become a reality." Who would have guessed that the Henderson brothers, Randall, Cliff, Phil and Carl could nudge a new community out of what was officially called Sand Hole by the United States government.

The war was over, materials became available, and mirages occurred in the form of the Desert Magazine Building (now L.G.'s Steakhouse) and the Shadow Mountain Club (the first real social magnet in paradise to draw buyers who wanted to own a little piece of it.) Both of these facilities were opened in 1948. It was not long before 1620 acres were purchased and divided into 17 parcels of land south of Highway 111, where houses began to sprout up and a city would eventually be realized.

Edgar Bergen, creator of the Charlie McCarthy puppet, invited Cliff and Randall Henderson to visit him at his ranch on Portola. He was recuperating in this dry climate and believed the brothers could also benefit.

Randall Henderson decided to move his printing business and popular Desert Magazine, published since 1937, from El Centro to this new area. He had begun his publishing venture with 618 subscribers, a total circulation of 7000. Mostly because of Desert Magazine circulation, a new post office was built and opened in July of 1947.

Cliff and Phil Henderson, Edgar Bergen, Harold Lloyd, Leonard Firestone and others owned the Pan Pacific auditorium in Los Angeles and had many contacts with the rich and famous. A town layout was completed and 19 investors divided large sums of money to build roads and water mains. The cove was made ready for a whole community. In early 1945 Cliff and Phil formed the Palm Desert Corporation to secure funds for streets and water, sales promotion and landscaping.

Phil, the third brother, died August 1, 1946, leaving most of the developing work to Cliff because Randall was inundated by the workings of his publishing company. Randall never became a direct participant in the community development project. However, he was always pushing for a complete community — library, theater and churches.

Much of the planning by the Henderson brothers began as early as 1944. It was in January of 1945 that Wilson McKenney met with Randall at the Desert Magazine site. Subsequently, construction of the building was begun by R. P. Shea of Indio at a cost of $216,000.

These two Hendersons, Cliff and Randall, took different paths to the same end. Cliff was more publicized and better known on a national level. He was the first director of Los Angeles International Airport in 1928. He launched construction of the the airport's first buildings before becoming the Managing Director of the National Air Races from 1928 through 1939. He originated several aviation expositions including the Bendix Trophy Race, the Thompson Trophy Classic, and the Powder Puff Derby. One aeronautical history book stated that, next to Charles Lindberg, Clifford W. Henderson did more than any other individual to attract American attention to aviation. He was listed as the P. T. Barnum of aviation.

Cliff's career spanned two world wars, beginning with the 35th Ambulance Unit in France during World War I. He served with the Army of Occupation in Germany and was commissioned in 1921 at Clover Field, California. World War II found Cliff in Dakar, Africa as the Military Commissioner, and after the invasion he served as assistant to Lt. General Harold George in the Army Air Corps, where he retired as colonel at war's end.

The rest is more history. In 1946 few believed Cliff and friends paid an average of $26 per acre for 17 parcels. Water was still their darkest threat. The cost of lots on El Paseo was $4000. They dug the first well at 612 feet, and eventually six others were added to supply growing demands.

Cliff had lofty plans for Palm Desert. Twenty miles of streets and water mains were built before a lot was sold. He was brash enough to cover all this property with a property owner's association which issued contract covenants and restrictions. Cliff wanted a class development; it was a huge dream, and it was only 12 miles from Palm Springs. A few great people, with several Hendersons in the lead, and look what developed. Phil administered, Carl sold, Randall preserved, and Cliff developed. That may be over-simplified, but this community came along rapidly and soundly as the plan unfolded.

Only a few years of history have gone by since the 1940's, but this all happened because of early exploration, foreknowledge, and pain-staking study. There truly was a formation process. The entire country was really in its infancy. Pioneers with curiosity and spirit bounced in and around this area until enough believers came and stayed.

The Juan Baptistas, Junipero Serras, Cahuilla tribes, and William Blakes had little water, no railroad, and meager backing; but gradually the process evolved into a united front. Slowly, tenacity won, because of a few dreamers who came through the Pass.

At times I'm afraid we fail to grasp what real pioneers accomplished, because in our time we have been given so much to start with. Read history and discover the truth. So-o-o, join us at the old fire station on El Paseo. It's your Historical Society! It's free! The Historical Society of Palm Desert now stands ready for your personal exploration and inspection.

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Membership is a high priority for the Society. Get your friends and associates to join!!!
Annual Dues: Life $1000, Patron $250, Contributing $100, Business $75 new-$50 renew, Supporting $50, Family $25, Individual $20.
It's a real bargain and a great gift idea. It's an investment in your community.

PRESIDENT'S SUMMER ACTIVITIES

During July and August when the Society office was closed to the public, President Hal Rover was busy. He attended the 38th annual history conference in Lakeside, which was sponsored by the Congress of History of San Diego and Imperial Counties. At the invitation of Charlotte Fox of the Temecula Historical Society, Hal toured the Railroad Museum. A field trip of the C.O.D. Friends of the Library took him to the Lincoln Historical Museum and the A. K. Smiley Library. Another excursion took him to see the Indian fish traps in the Avenue 66 & Jackson area. Also, Cub Scouts of Bear Den - Pack 674 led by Laura Schawacker were treated to a tour of our historic fire house. We are happy to report that Hal and his wife, Angie, did take a little time to get away from this summer's oppressive heat.

ANNUAL MINI-MUSTER PROGRAM
October is Fire Safety Month

As we return to our regular schedule after a summer hiatus, our Mini-Muster program for local third graders is right on track. Dan Callahan, B.J. Callahan, Jan Holmlund, and newcomers this year John and Madonna Marmon are working along with the Desert Sands Unified School District and the Riverside County Fire Department - station #33 to make this a great fun and learning experience for the youngsters. The schedule is as follows:

- October 2 - Thursday - Jimmie Carter School
- October 7 - Tuesday - Gerald Ford School
- October 9 - Thursday - Abraham Lincoln School
- October 14 - Tuesday - George Washington School

Check your calendar to see when you can volunteer to help out during this rewarding activity. Call B.J. Callahan at 346-6522 and she will put your name on her schedule. We would like to have all volunteers wear our red Historical Society of Palm Desert tee-shirts. These are available for sale at Society headquarters.

Awards ceremonies at which we honor outstanding entries by children in the program also take place in October. Please join us on these special occasions. They are as follows:

- October 16 - Thursday - Indian Wells Council Chambers at 1:30 p.m.
- October 23 - Thursday - Palm Desert Council Chambers at 4:00 p.m.

FALL LUNCHEON

Under the able direction of Jean Hollenbeck, details are coming together for this annual social event. It will be a week earlier than usual this year – Wednesday, October 15. The place is Desert Falls Country Club, with an hour to get reacquainted with other members and guests beginning at 11:00 a.m. Lunch will be served at noon. The cost is $20 per person. You won't want to miss our illustrious speaker – Patricia "Corky" Larson. She has been a local leader for many years and is now retired. Come hear her spin some yarns as she talks about "My Life in the Desert." This promises to be a spectacular event.....save the date and invite a friend to come with you! Watch for your invitation in the mail.

DOCENT MEETING

Jean Ernst held a training meeting on Sept.11 for volunteers. Adele Ruxton reported on a new program being planned for children in grades 1 thru 4, which will entail a field trip to see the exhibit "Firefighting: Tools of the Trade." As new exhibits are being initiated, and others are being changed or revitalized, we will need additional volunteers for our docent program. This is a very interesting and gratifying activity for those who like to talk to people. There are a number of things around the fire house to do. Call Jean at 346-0041 to volunteer. Also, if you would like to attend a CVWD tour on Nov. 13, contact Jean for details.

ANNUAL FIRE HOUSE YARD SALE
October 25 & 26
Saturday – 7 a.m. till noon
Sunday – 9 a.m. till noon

There is still time to donate your usable discards for the sale. We want everything except clothing and shoes. Bring your things to the fire house on Mon/Wed/Fri from 10-3. If you need a pick-up or would like to help with the sale, call 346-6588. Receipts available upon request.

* Pres. Hal and secretary Anne Tuttle have been working on the sale all summer. We thank the following people for large donations to the yard sale:

•Gerry & Linda Thibault •Lynn Oberlies
•Estate of Ted & Ruby Hamilton, & children
Bob & Louise King/ Dee & Stan Singer

DONATIONS: ARCHIVES/EXHIBITS

Larry & Sondra Johnson..flood newspapers
Jean Ernst.....People-to-People/CV history
Do you have any photos & negatives from the '79 flood that would be useful to us?

GOLF CART PARADE - Nov. 2

Our entry of the antique fire engine with Mr. & Mrs. Santa has become a tradition which people look forward to seeing each year.

UPCOMING EVENT SCHEDULE

Oct. 2-14.....Mini-Muster Program
Oct. 15.....Fall Luncheon
Oct. 25 & 26.....Yard Sale
Nov. 2.....Golf Cart Parade
Nov. 13.....CVWD tour (call Jean Ernst at 346-0041)

NEW MEMBERS

Elizabeth Gullander.....Supporting
James Leier/Lenora Heime.....Supporting
Robert & Denise Burns.....Family
W. Lewis & Judith Clark.....Family
Joe & Mary Gaugush.....Family

Notes of Interest: Evonne Henderson Riddell is back in the desert again.
Sandra York, former owner of a dress shop in Palm Desert, recently passed away.

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